

Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute  
Indians (Thomas Indian School)  
Route 438  
Cattaraugus Reservation  
Irving  
Erie County  
New York

HABS No. NY-6012

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~~PHOTOGRAPHS~~

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

THOMAS ASYLUM FOR ORPHAN  
AND DESTITUTE INDIANS  
(Thomas Indian School)

HABS No. NY-6012

Location: Route 438, Cattaraugus Reservation, Irving, Erie County,  
New York

Present Owner: Seneca Indian Nation

Present Occupant: Vacant

Significance: The Thomas Indian School was the social and educational center of the Cattaraugus Reservation from the end of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century.

Built by the state in 1900, the Thomas Indian School on the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation was planned as a self-sufficient campus with red brick Georgian Revival main buildings and a multitude of farm and vocational buildings behind. This school was for years the educational and social center of the reservation, and it gained regional influence as Indian children from other reservations boarded there.

The history of the Thomas Indian School precedes the present structures by about fifty years. The school, or asylum as it was known at first, began on a very modest scale with the purpose of caring for homeless and destitute Indian children. It was started under the direction of a Quaker missionary couple, Rev. and Mrs. Asher Wright, with the assistance of a private benefactor, Mr. Philip E. Thomas, a Baltimore banker. In gratitude for his services to their people, the Seneca Nation named Thomas their representative to Washington.

The asylum struggled along on a minimal budget relying primarily on private contributions until 1875 when it was on the verge of closing. Then, due to the intervention of William P. Letchworth, a prominent western New York State figure and at that time vice-president of the State Board of Charities, the State of New York assumed the support of the institution.

The old facilities continued in use until 1898 when the school came under the supervision of the state Department of Social Welfare, and a New York City architectural firm, Barney and Chapman, was commissioned to design an elaborate new development plan. John S. Barney and Henry Otis Chapman were well known in New York City for their churches and commercial buildings. A state-financed rural boarding school for the Seneca Indians in western New York State presented new challenges and opportunities to these metropolitan architects.

The Thomas Indian School is surrounded by fields on the north side of Route 438 on the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation, thirty miles south of Buffalo.

The campus, as planned around 1900, has nine principal red brick buildings: the infirmary, the schoolhouse, four dormitories, the employees' residence, the dining room-kitchen, and the administration building. Behind these structures to the north extend over twenty-five dependencies including a gymnasium, a carpentry shop, a power house, an ice house, greenhouses, chicken house, stables, barns, a piggery, several garages and three small cottages, one of which, Sunset Cottage, is said to date from the mid-nineteenth century. Except for the infirmary building which is currently occupied by various social agencies, and the administration building and employees' residence which are unoccupied but in salvageable condition, all other buildings composing the campus are in desrepair to a point beyond economical restoration. Many of the farm support buildings have either burned or fallen apart.

The layout of the campus (see sketch plan), is centered on a main driveway and on the administration building. Stretching in a semi-circle to the rear (north) of the administration building are from the west to east: the schoolhouse, two girls' dormitories, the dining room-kitchen, two boys' dormitories and the employees' residence. To the west of the schoolhouse is the infirmary, and a pond is located in the comparable position east of the employees' residence.

The nine principal buildings are all red brick with stone trim. Certain architectural features are common to all these buildings--hip roof, symmetrically placed chimneys, projecting cornice with dentils, and a belt course separating the rusticated ground story from those above. Most of the buildings have rusticated terra-cotta quoins above the first floor.

All the brick buildings are 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 stories, but despite their aimilarity in scale each building differs in layout and details. The administration building standa out aa the most elaborate structure with its pillared entrance porch, receased doorway with an elliptical fanlight and sidelights, and its palladian windows on the second and third floors. On the second floor two Indian statues stand in niches on either side of the center window and cartouches above the other second story windows have garlands of wheat and corn.

The dormitories are U-shaped in plan and are two and a half stories with an arcade running the length of the first floor front (south) facade. Above the arcade are dormers.

The dining room to the north of the administration building combines the arcade idea of the dormitories with the scale of the larger buildings. Three arched windows are centered above the first floor arcade, and on the third floor are three dormer windows. Two plaques on the second story level read: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" and "I, freedom, dwell with knowledge."

The dining room has been vandalized so that nothing is intact. The ravages of time and weather have attacked the roof and cornice so that water has permeated most walls making them structurally unsound. Unfortunately the building is beyond repair,

At present the only occupied building is the infirmary which houses the Community Action Agency and various social service agencies. Otherwise the buildings have been abandoned since they were last used in the 1960's as an out-patients' clinic for the nearby mental hospital.

A system of underground tunnels connects the administration building to the semi-circle of dormitories, dining room, schoolhouse and employees' residence. Between the dormitories different varieties of trees were planted in circles, a symbolic Indian configuration. The grounds to the south of the buildings have been maintained and present a pleasant park-like effect.

Outline History of the Thomas Indian School

- c.1840 Philip E. Thomas initially donated funds for the care of orphaned children by Reverend and Mrs. Asher Wright
- 1855 Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children incorporated  
15 acres of land obtained from the Seneca Nation and a cornerstone for the Asylum building laid
- 1856 The first buiding, which comprised the entire asylum complex at that time, was completed
- 1875 Thomas Asylum placed under jurisdiction of the New York State Board Charities and officially became administered by the state
- 1881 Jon Van Valkenburg appointed first superintendent, served until 1892
- 1890 Library donated to school by William C. Bryant
- 1895 George Lincoln appointed superintendent. Grades K-6 operating and first Regents Examinations given. First year of graduations from the sixth grade
- 1898 School placed under supervision of New York State Department of Social Welfare
- 1900 Expansion of facilities begun
- 1901 New buildings completed or under construction included: Administration Building, Stewart Hall, 2 girls' dormitories and a school building
- 1902 Athletics introduced to curriculum
- 1903 Recommendation that name be changed to Thomas Indian School
- 1905 Name formally changed to Thomas Indian School  
Scholastic department re-organized by John C. Brennan, head teacher and acting principal. Grades 7 and 8 added and Regents Diploma required for graduation
- 1909 Construction begun on boys' dormitory and a vegetable cellar
- 1913 Addition to classroom building completed
- 1921-  
1923 Shop building constructed
- 1924 Girls' dormitories remodeled and the hospital improved

- 1926 A gymnasium built as an addition to old paint shop
- 1930 9th grade added and school became a Junior High School
- 1932 First day school students enrolled
- 1938 The school became a registered Middle School

General Depression Years - Period of greatest expansion of facilities and included the following:

- a. complete hospital built
- b. school and shop enlarged and modernized
- c. Wells Cottage completed
- d. additions to Administration building and Sunset Cottage
- e. Sunrise Cottage remodeled
- f. Outdoor swimming pool built
- g. sewage disposal plant built
- h. library room placed in the school building
- i. other improvements ...

1950-

- 1951 School taken over by New York State Education Department

- 1955 School grounds reportedly included 332 acres, 31 structures, a swimming pool and a playground

Centralization of New York State Schools in progress, Thomas Indian School to be closed. Seneca Nation of Indians reportedly determined that school should be converted to Vocational High School and/or Junior College

- 1956 Thomas Indian School permanently closed

- 1958 School grounds utilized by Gowanda State Hospital, reportedly leased for a five year period

c.1962-

- present Period of general decline and deterioration. Some buildings demolished for various reasons including construction of new offices

Outline History References:

- A) Renz, Lucia M. 1948
- B) Hobson, David W. 1969
- C) Huff, Henry M. Jr. 1977

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## PROJECT INFORMATION

Demolition of structures at the Thomas Indian School is to be funded through the Office of Indian Programs, Department of Housing and Urban Development. Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, mitigative documentation was undertaken by James W. Ballagh, Director of Development, Seneca Nation Housing Authority, in July 1983.

